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## **Arkansas Judges Team Up with PBS's Tavis Smiley for "Listening Tour"**

**Williamsburg, Va.** (October 6, 2016)—Judges are known to be expert listeners, but a new format is taking their listening skills to a higher level. Four Arkansas judicial leaders recently participated in the second installment of *Courting Justice*, a national "listening tour" being produced in cooperation with PBS broadcaster Tavis Smiley. The tour aims to connect judges with the communities they serve in order to provide people from disenfranchised communities an opportunity to discuss the issues that erode trust in our judicial system. The judges and a studio audience recorded two sessions at the Central Arkansas Library's Ron Robinson Theatre in Little Rock on Friday, September 23. The two half-hour segments will air as a one-hour special across the state on the Arkansas Educational Television Network, **Monday, October 10** during prime time. Please check your local station for the time slot.

Arkansas judicial panelists included: Circuit Judge and Chief Justice-Elect John Dan Kemp, Circuit Judge Wiley A. Branton, Jr., Circuit Judge Carlton D. Jones, and District Judge Kim Bridgforth. The audience was made up of guests representing Arkansas-based social justice, advocacy, faith and small business communities, in addition to local court and bar leaders. The initial program aired September 28 and 29 on PBS stations statewide and nationally.

"We are most pleased that the listening tour is coming to Arkansas. While the judges will discuss courtroom developments, community leaders will bring their valuable perspective. The dialogue will assist in the common goal of justice for all persons, in both reality and perception," said Arkansas Chief Justice Howard W. Brill said before the taping.

"I am gratified that many of the most influential judges in the country are eager to step down from the bench and engage in a free and open exchange with the people most affected by their decisions," said Tavis Smiley, who serves on the advisory board of the initiative. "This frank discussion is unprecedented. Securing the public's trust in our judicial system is fundamental to our democracy."

The listening tour is an effort of the Community Engagement in the State Courts initiative, which is a joint project of the Conference of Chief Justices (CCJ), the National Center for State Courts (NCSC),

the State Justice Institute (SJI) and the National Consortium on Racial and Ethnic Fairness (NCREF). The initiative aims to develop effective tools and resources that assist state court leaders in engaging marginalized and disenfranchised communities to ensure equal access to justice for all, and to improve the trust and confidence those communities have in state courts. A recent survey conducted for the National Center for State Courts found that only 32 percent of African Americans believe that state courts provide equal justice to all.

“In order to be fair and impartial,” said Chief Judge Eric T. Washington of the District of Columbia Court of Appeals and chair of the initiative, “judges have to be equal opportunity listeners. While we are used to listening to the concerns of the litigants who appear in our courtrooms, our focus on resolving individual cases has in many ways kept us from seeing the forest for the trees. As a result, surveys show that there has been an erosion of trust between the courts and the communities we serve, especially communities of color. This innovative, multi-city town hall series allows us to hear from, and listen to, new perspectives on how courts can better deliver justice for all.” Chief Judge Washington is a past president of the Conference of Chief Justices (CCJ), and serves as chair of the Community Engagement in the State Courts initiative.

The Little Rock taping is the second gathering on the *Courting Justice* tour. The first installment took place in Los Angeles on June 6; a third is scheduled for recording in Cleveland, Ohio on December 8.

Support for “Courting Justice” is provided by SJI, NCSC, Walmart, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Public Welfare Foundation. More information about Courting Justice is available on NCSC’s website at [ncsc.org/courtingjustice](http://ncsc.org/courtingjustice).

*The National Center for State Courts, headquartered in Williamsburg, Va., is a nonprofit court organization dedicated to improving the administration of justice by providing leadership and service to the state courts. Founded in 1971 by the Conference of Chief Justices and Chief Justice of the United States, Warren E. Burger, NCSC provides education, training, management and research services to the nation’s state courts.*

*Tavis Smiley is currently host of the late night television show Tavis Smiley on PBS, now in its 13<sup>th</sup> season, as well as “The Tavis Smiley Show” on Public Radio International. He is the author or co-author of 20 books, and his non-profit Tavis Smiley Foundation is now in the midst of a \$3 million four-year campaign called “Ending Poverty: America’s Silent Spaces” to help focus on alleviating endemic poverty in America. TIME magazine named Smiley to the TIME 100, a list of “The World’s 100 Most Influential People.”*

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